

Literature Circle Guide to LOVE THAT DOG by Sharon Creech

Book Summary

Jack doesn't care much for poetry, writing it or reading it. With the prodding of his teacher, though, he begins to write poems of his own — about a mysterious blue car, about a lovable dog. Slowly, he realizes that his brain isn't “empty” and that he can write poems. After meeting one of his favorite writers, Walter Dean Meyers, Jack writes a special poem about a painful experience in his life, the death of his dog. By the end of the book, Jack realizes that writing and reading poetry is not only pleasurable, but that writing can be a way of dealing with painful memories. Instead of trying to forget those difficult experiences, he can make something creative out of them.

Author Information

Known for writing with a classic voice and unique style, Sharon Creech is the best-selling author of the Newbery Medal winner *Walk Two Moons*, and the Newbery Honor Book *The Wanderer*. She is also the first American in history to be awarded the CILIP Carnegie Medal for *Ruby Holler*. Her other works include the novels *Love That Dog*, *Bloomability*, *Abolutely Normal Chaos*, *Chasing Redbird*, and *Pleasing the Ghost*, and two picture books: *A Fine, Fine School* and *Fishing in the Air*. These stories are often centered around life, love, and relationships -- especially family relationships. Growing up in a big family in Cleveland, Ohio, helped Ms. Creech learn to tell stories that wouldn't be forgotten in all of the commotion: "I learned to exaggerate and embellish, because if you didn't, your story was drowned out by someone else's more exciting one."

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. Jack doesn't want to write poetry at the beginning of the book. Why doesn't he want to?

Jack thinks “boys don't write poetry. Girls do.” He also says that he can't write poetry because his “brain's empty.”

2. In Jack's first poem, he writes:

*So much depends
upon
a blue car
splattered with mud
speeding down the road.*

Why was the blue car important to Jack?

The blue car was meaningful to Jack because it was the car that hit and killed his dog, Sky.

3. What caused Miss Strechberry to be so interested in Jack's first poem? Describe what

Miss Strechberry does to get Jack to write more poems, especially about the blue car. **Miss Strechberry perhaps sensed there was a reason why Jack wrote about this single, blue car, even though Jack insisted that he didn't need to explain why he wrote what he did. To get Jack to write more about the blue car, Miss Strechberry shows him a poem by William Blake, called "The Tiger." Jack writes an imitation of Blake's poem, using the blue car as the subject instead of a tiger. She also types Jack's poems and prints them on colored paper, displaying them on the classroom board but leaving his name off, at first.**

4. How does Jack respond when Miss Strechberry asks him to write about a pet? Why do you think Miss Strechberry insists Jack write the poem despite his reaction? **At first, Jack insists that he has no pets, then he admits that he used to have one. Perhaps his teacher senses that if Jack *used to* have a pet, then there might be an interesting story there. Jack also admits that he doesn't *want* to write about his pet, and maybe his teacher realizes that there is something painful about that pet that Jack is protecting. Teachers might want to discuss that often it is helpful to write about painful experiences, and sometimes these can make the most interesting pieces of writing.**

5. What are Jack's feelings toward Sky? Make a list of details from the book that describes Jack's feelings toward his dog. **Jack seems to miss his dog Sky very much and remembers him fondly. The details he remembers about the dog are so crisp that it's as though he were still alive, and perhaps Jack is having a hard time letting the dog go...**

**"his tongue all limp
and his chin
between
his paws"**

**Sky used to "chomp" at fleas
and had "loose skin."**

**"A long red tongue," hanging out
"big black eyes looking a little sad"
"a long tail"**

**"his shaggy straggly paws/on my chest/like he was trying/to hug the insides/right
outside of me"**

6. Jack changes a great deal in the novel. Think about these changes. Then create a two-column chart with two headings: "Beginning of school year" and "End of school year." Under each heading, list examples of the things Jack does, thinks, and says in the beginning of the year compared to the end of the year.

Beginning of school year:

“Boys don’t write poetry. Girls do.”

“Brain’s empty” ...Jack claims he’s got nothing to write about.

“I don’t understand that poem” ...Jack is confused about why the poet would want to write about a red wheelbarrow, why “so much depends” upon it.

“any words can be a poem”

“I don’t want to write about that blue car...”

“you can put [my poems] on the board, but only if you don’t put my name on them”

...At first, Jack doesn’t want his classmates to know he wrote poems.

“I don’t have any pets, so I can’t write about one”

“I don’t want to write about it” ...Jack is reluctant to write about his dog because the memories of him are still too painful.

End of school year:

“That was the best best BEST poem you read yesterday” ...Jack really enjoys the poem “Love That Boy” by Walter Dean Myers. He also likes it so much because he can relate to it — certain moments in the poem remind him of moments from his own life: when the speaker of “Love That Boy” calls his son “Hey there, son!” Jack is reminded that he used to call his dog, Sky, in a similar way: “Hey there, Sky.”

“Sometimes when you are trying not to think about something it keeps coming back...”

When Jack writes the poem “My Sky,” he not only lets his teacher post it on the board, but he lets her include his name with it.

Jack not only comes to love the poems Miss Strechberry shows the class, but he gets Walter Dean Myers to visit his class after writing him a letter.

7. Imagine Miss Strechberry has just asked Jack to write an essay telling what he has discovered about poetry and how it can change a person’s life. What would the essay say?

Emphasize to students that Jack would admit that he was initially reluctant to write poetry, that, at first, he didn’t understand what the poet meant by writing about a red wheelbarrow or a tiger. Point out that a poet often writes about details from his or her own experiences, such as when Jack writes about the blue car but without writing about — or even realizing — why the blue car is meaningful to him.

Poetry can be a way of writing about painful memories and experiences, too. This is important because it allows the reader to connect the experiences in the poem to similar experiences in his or her own life. Writing about Sky, Jack was able to realize how much he missed the dog, and how upset he perhaps still was over the dog’s death. However, he was also able to remember some of the best things about Sky, helping him begin the healing process and saying good-bye.

8. Sky’s death affected Jack deeply. If you had just lost a much-loved pet, what things could you, or other people, do to help you cope with the loss? Create a list of ideas.

Possible ideas:

Write about the pet; not simply a poem but a short story, a journal.

Talk to a trusted friend or teacher or parent about the loss, someone who perhaps has gone through what you have and can sympathize.

Volunteer at an animal shelter, a place where you can be around animals and make a difference in making their lives better.

Create a photo album with captions for each picture that show the fond memories you have of the pet. This might seem painful, at first, but it will give you something to look back on in the future, when the pain is less severe, and it's a great creative outlet.

9. Miss Strechberry is able to convince Jack to write poetry and share his feelings even though he doesn't want to. Point out the qualities Miss Strechberry has as a person, and as a teacher, that allow her to reach Jack.

Miss Strechberry doesn't push Jack too hard to write or share his feelings; she does it slowly and gently. For instance, when he writes about the blue car, she asks him why the car is so important, but she doesn't force him to say or write any more. She also shows him poems he might like that act as models for the poems he eventually writes about Sky. Miss Strechberry also encourages Jack by typing up his poems so they look professional and asking permission to put them on the board, without forcing him. She gives Jack the option of listing the author's name as Anonymous, rather than force Jack to reveal himself to his classmates.

10. Why does Jack fall in love with Walter Dean Myers' poetry? What effect does Mr. Myers' visit to the school have on Jack? How do you know?

Jack seems to be inspired by Myers' poems. Some of the lines and the language Myers uses reminds him of language he himself used when he still had his dog Sky (such as the way he used to call out to the dog: "Hey there, Sky"). Jack is so inspired by "Love That Boy" that he writes the first poem that actually calls Sky by his name.

Jack is even more excited after meeting Walter Dean Myers than he was when he wrote the letter inviting him to the school. As a thank-you, Jack writes Myers another letter, this one telling him how much he and the rest of his classmates enjoyed the visit. As a final tribute to Myers, Jack includes a poem he wrote about Sky called "Love That Dog," which is inspired by Myers' "Love That Boy."

11. There are many ways a poet can paint a picture in a reader's mind with words. They include similes, metaphors, onomatopoeia, and more. Find examples of the techniques the poets use in *Love That Dog*. As a group, choose three verses from the novel that created the most vivid pictures.

Similes, metaphors, and onomatopoeic language:

"blue car...speeding by like a comet in the sky" (p. 8)

"dogs...bark, bark barking" (p. 26)

(“Bark” is an onomatopoeic word, a word that sounds similar to the action that it describes.)

more onomatopoeic words:

“whisp, meow, swish” (p. 32)

“Sometimes when you are trying to think about something it keeps popping back into your head...until your brain feels like a squished pea.” (p. 64)

about the spell check inside the computer:

“It is like a miracle...a little helper brain” (p. 67)

about Walter Dean Myers’ voice:

“low and deep and friendly and warm

like it was reaching out and

wrapping us all up

in a big squeeze”

about Myers’ laugh:

“like it was coming from way deep down

and bubbling up and

rolling and tumbling

out into the air” (p. 83)

“love that dog —

like a bird loves to fly” page 86

12. Did reading *Love That Dog* change your point of view about poetry? In what ways? Explain your answer.

Possible answers:

Poetry doesn’t always have to rhyme.

Poetry can be easy to follow, not confusing.

It can tell a story.

It can be funny.

It can be about ordinary, “nonpoetic” things, like a red wheelbarrow or a pet dog.

Even a kid can write a poem.

Writing can help us feel better about painful experiences and make us realize how strong our memories and emotions are.

Sometimes poetry is best when it just comes pouring out of your head and you don’t think too much about what it means.

13. At the end of the book, the author includes poems by seven famous American poets. Which poem did you like the best, and why?

Make sure to have the students explain what they like about the poems. Ask them to compare the styles of the poems — from the end rhyme of Frost and Blake, to the

strict imagery of Williams. You can also discuss some of the value of poetic styles — why, for instance, rhyme might make it sometimes more difficult to understand the meaning of the poem, but is a treat for the ears. Which poems are more like the music students listen to? Why? What is it that makes Williams' "Red Wheelbarrow" a poem and not just a bunch of words broken into lines, like Jack thought when he first read the poem?

Students are often intimidated by poetry when they have to talk about or analyze a poem in its entirety. But when you get them to break it down into certain elements — line length, word choice, use of rhyme — students can talk very intelligently about why these elements are used in a given poem, and they can also surprise themselves by how much they know, intuitively, about poetry.

Activities

1. It's the end of the school year, and Jack wants to thank Miss Strechberry for being such a great teacher. Compose a letter or write a poem from Jack that shows his appreciation for Miss Strechberry.

The class could compose a group letter. With students, write a list on the board of things Jack might say or write, then have each student write his or her own poem.

2. Choose your favorite poem at the end of *Love That Dog*, and tell what the narrator was trying to say in your own words.

Read the poems to your students, then have them copy a single poem in their own handwriting, for better comprehension and to become more familiar with the poem. Ask them, then, to choose words that "leap off" the page, that seem surprising or especially interesting to them. Let those words help them arrive at some kind of meaning about what the poem is about.

3. In "The Apple," by S.C. Rigg, and "My Yellow Dog," by Jack, the words form the shape of the poem's subject. Write your own "shape" poem.

Possible shapes:

Tree/Christmas tree

Fish

Car/school bus

Hands/feet

Shoes/sneakers

Bear

Horse

Snake

Head with crazy hair

Eyeglasses

Food: pizza, hot dog, bagel

3. Get a collection of poems by your favorite poet. Read the collection, then select your favorite poem. Create a collage that illustrates what the poem is about.

More poets that kids might enjoy:

William Carlos Williams

Walt Whitman

Edgar Allan Poe

Frank O'Hara

Shel Silverstein

Gwendolyn Brooks

Wallace Stevens

John Ashbery

e.e. cummings